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ABSTRACT

Many factors are contributive to a rise in the rate of remarriage among older adults. Statistical and survey data on the condition of the elderly suggest that: (1) the number of elderly marriages has increased dramatically in recent years; (2) improved health status allows older adults greater socialization and mobility which greatly enhance the chances for remarriage; (3) the trend to live in single residences fosters the desire for remarriage; and (4) older adults value their freedom and independence. Attitudes of older adults and significant others in their environment reflect little condemnation of remarriage by younger persons and a trend toward acceptance of remarriage by older adults themselves. Social policy is also influential in affecting remarriage rates as evidenced by changes in Social Security laws and the proliferation of programs designed to help older adults remain in their homes as long as possible, e.g. senior citizen recreation centers, subsidized meal programs, and special transportation services. (Author/HLM)

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Remarriage Among the Elderly: Present and Future*

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Remarriage Among the Elderly: Present and Future

The purpose of this paper is to identify factors conductive to a rise in the rate of remarriage among people 65 and older. It has been asserted that the rate of remarriage among the elderly is not likely to increase, and that much attention to this phenomenon is therefore unwarranted. (Treas and Van Hilst, 1976). Although remarriage is an option currently chosen by only a small minority of elders, it is my contention that older people will march to the alter with increasing frequency. The question concerning the increase in remarriage is an important one because remarriage is satisfying to the majority of older people who undertake it, leading to abolition of loneliness, a renewed sense of self-worth, the warmth of intimacy, and improved health care (Vinick, 1977).

Various factors will be considered in relation to the increase in remarriage among the elderly. Conclusions are derived from the implications of 1) statistical and survey data representing the current and projected condition of the elderly in the U. S., 2) review of the literature concerning attitudes toward old age sex and remarriage, 3) results of a recent in-depth interview study of remarried elderly men and women (Jacobs and Vinick, 1978), and 4) social policy.

Demographic and Social Factors

The number of elderly brides and grooms has increased dramatically in recent years. A comparison of numbers of old age marriages in the United States Marriage Registration Area in 1960 and 1973 reveals that the number of brides 65 and over has more than doubled to over 16,000 and the number of grooms has almost doubled to over 33,000 (DHEW, 1964 and 1975). More than 35,000 marriages now occur annually in which one of the participants is 65 or over. Moreover, the pool of potential old age brides and grooms is increasing. From 1974 to 1985 the number of unmarried females in the U. S. is expected to rise by about three million, and the number of unmarried males by about 700,000 (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). Therefore, the phenomenon of old age marriage is worthy of attention in terms of increase in incidence, even if there is no change in the percentages of elderly men and women who remarry.

There is some indication that remarriages are increasing, albeit to a small extent, over and above the increase in sheer numbers of elders in the population. Rates of remarriage have been computed by comparing the number of widowed and divorced people 65 and over in the population in one year with the number of remarriages of people in that age group in the same year. In 1960, approximately 10 men out of 1000 widowers and divorced

men over 65 remarried; in 1970 the rate was up 58 percent as approximately 20 men per 1000 eligibles remarried. The rate increased from 1.15 percent to almost 2 percent. The rate for women increased in a similar manner from .16 percent in 1960 to .23 percent in 1970. The remarriage rates for these years are actually higher because total numbers of ever-married single elders in the entire population were compared with remarriages in only 41 states, those in the Marriage Registration Area of the U. S. (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1964 and 1972).

In addition to demographic factors, there are several reasons to believe that remarriage will become an increasingly popular option for older people. The first relates to health status, which is improving. Being able to "get out of the house" and to socialize with peers greatly enhances the chances for remarriage. Although one-third of the remarried elders in my sample* of 48 suffered from a chronic health condition, with the exception of one woman who had married her late sister's husband while in a wheelchair, everyone was mobile and active at the beginning of the relationship.

*The sample was drawn from marriage license records of two Massachusetts communities for a five-year period. All couples meeting age criteria (one spouse 60 or over, the other 65 or over) at remarriage were contacted. At the time of the interviews, all had been married from two to six years.

The majority of people 65 and over are in good health. Only one in 20 resides in an institution. And among the non-institutionalized population of the U. S. one study showed that only 6 percent are unable to prepare a meal; only 5 percent cannot do light housework; only 3 percent cannot wash themselves (Shanas, 1968). As poverty among the elderly diminishes, as educational levels rise, and as more effective forms of public health and improved systems of health care become realities, the health of old people will improve even more (Neugarten and Havighurst, 1977).

Another factor in the prediction of an increase in remarriage is the trend to single residence. This fosters romantic possibilities and the desire for remarriage. The majority of widows and widowers prefer to live by themselves rather than with children or other relatives. In the 20-year period from 1950 to 1970, the proportion of elderly people living with relatives fell from more than 20 percent to 12.5 percent. Old people live with children when necessary, mainly because of poor health, and this is often the last step before institutionalization (Shanas, 1960; Brody and Spark, 1966).

The remarried people I interviewed valued their independence and most had not considered living with a child during widowhood. As one man remarked:

> I always said I wouldn't live with my son. I don't think it's fair to them. I don't want to become a bother. If I want to get up at two o'clock in the morning, put the light on, I don't want to wake up the whole family.

Of the eight people who had lived in a child's home, most had found the situation unsatisfactory. Statements about being a "fifth-wheel" were typical.

Elderly people living alone have the independence and freedom from sanctions to form new relationships. But independence is often associated with loneliness. Helen Lopata (1973) found that well over half the elderly widows interviewed cited loneliness as the most important problem of widowhood. The former widowers in my sample described themselves as having been lonely even more often than the former widows. The highest rate of suicide is among elderly men living alone (Bock, 1972). Therefore, people living alone not only have the freedom, but in many cases, the motivation born of loneliness to seek out another mate.

Attitudes

An area of great importance in determining the future of remarriage among the elderly has to do with the attitudes of older people themselves and significant others in their environment. There is evidence that 1) in spite of a popular

notion to the contrary, younger people in our society do not condemn the elderly bride or groom, and 2) that although older people presently hold more negative views of remarriage than younger people, attitudes of elders can and will change in a more positive direction. Among a group of elders whom I addressed, several thought that the only reason most older people married was for financial profit.

In his pioneering study of remarriage in old age, Walter McKain (1969) stated that the elderly newlywed's "friends, his children, and the community at large rise up and condemn his remarriage. He is regarded as 'too old for that.'" Although there is no support for this contention in the findings of the study, this generalization has been widely disseminated (e.g. Atchley, 1976; Nye and Berardo, 1973). If older people think younger people disapprove or will ridicule their remarriage, it may be a factor in dissuading them.

In actuality, the relatives and friends of the majority of elders in both McKain's study and my own approved of the remarriage. For example, of the 48 people I interviewed, only two men and one woman met with entirely negative reactions from children. While a few had a mixed reception, well over half said that their children had approved the remarriage. These elders suggested that their children welcomed relief from the responsibility of providing companionship and/or care or worrying about their being alone. Besides, they added, their

children were happy because they were happy. The children who had been "shocked" or inhospitable to the idea of parental remarriage had softened their criticism if they saw the marriage working well.

A greater number of negative sanctions might have been expected from children. Children of no matter what age resist the idea of parents as sexual beings (Pocs and Godow, 1977). Further, popular opinion fosters the idea that children will resent the possible financial implications of remarriage. None of the remarrieds mentioned that.

Popular mythology would lead one to expect disapproval from children of these elders. But, surprisingly, a review of studies which have specifically tested attitudes toward old age remarriage would not lead one to expect general disapproval among younger people. If one disregards impressionistic statements in the literature and focuses instead on responses of samples to specific items concerning sex and marriage in the later years, a pattern of acceptance, and not condemnation appears.

More than 20 years ago, only 27 percent of a student sample agreed with stereotypical statements about older people: "they should not marry" and "they have no interest in the opposite sex." (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953). Five years later, the same researchers found a 16 percent acceptance rate of the same statements among people who had worked with the aged (Tuckman and Lorge, 1958). Administration of a revision of the

Tuckman-Lorge questionnaire in 1961 (Axelrod and Eisdorfer, 1961) showed essentially the same results.

In 1959, Golde and Kogan, using a sentence completion design, found that only 5 percent of younger males and 9 percent of younger females subscribed to the notion that "sex for most old people is..." negative, distasteful, or taboo. A far higher percentage of the young people (67 percent) responded that sex for old people is unimportant, past, or no longer interesting.

In 1968, Stinnet and Montgomery, using a Perception of Older Marriages Scale, found that among a sample of undergraduates only 10 percent were unfavorable toward old age marriages. And a recent study (McCrory, 1976) found no difference in the attitudes of a group of trade school students toward "sexual expression" by old people and by young people.

Several studies have found more restrictive attitudes to old age sex and remarriage among older people themselves than among younger cohorts (Tuckman and Lorge, 1958; Kogan and Shelton, 1962; Wasow and Loeb, 1975). Peterson and Peters (1971) referred to an unpublished study in which different age groups of people were asked to judge the appropriateness of behavior including "a widower of 70 who remarries even though his adult children do not approve" and "a 68 year old widow inviting a widower to her home for dinner." The researchers found less acceptance of these behavior items as the age of respondents increased. Elderly respondents were also asked

how they expected younger people to respond; younger respondents were more approving than elders had anticipated.

Similarly, the remarried elders in my study reported that friends were less approving than younger relatives. One woman mentioned her friend Sally who herself "didn't have the courage" to remarry. Every time they spoke on the phone, Sally would ask, "What's the matter?" as if expecting the worst. When Sally, and disapproving friends of other respondents realized that their misgivings were unfounded, their attitudes became more positive.

As more remarried elders become available as role models to their peers, more elders will, no doubt, become amenable to remarriage. In contrast to McKain's sample, of the newlyweds I interviewed 72 percent of the women and 87 percent of the men knew other older people who had remarried. Moreover, it can be predicted that as younger cohorts age, they will bring with them the flexible ideas about sex and remarriage indicated by the studies above.

Several studies, mentioned previously, indicated that although younger people do not condemn sex in old age, they tend to think of older people as asexual -- as not needing or wanting sex. Research showing the fallacy of such beliefs began with Kinsey's report (1948). Masters and Johnson's (1966) findings concerning sexuality in old age laid to rest any doubts about

the sexual capacity of older people. The longitudinal study of elders at Duke (Verwoerdt et al, 1969; Pfeiffer et al, 1969; Pfeiffer et al, 1972) confirmed the ongoing sexuality of older people as have other recent sources (Kaplan, 1974; Butler and Lewis 1976). It seems probable that the message of these studies is "filtering down to the masses", as one geriatric psychiatrist has observed (Berezin, 1975). For instance, the academy award winning movie, Harry and Tonto, showed Harry, a man in his seventies, as capable of enjoying more than just the smile of a young prostitute.

As older people gain more positive feedback from the environment concerning the normality of sex in later years, there will be fewer cases of psychological impotence and dysfunction. Fewer people will feel "I'm too old for that" and perhaps more of them will seek new mates as sexual partners. In fact, a few observers have cautioned that the "new" norms which imply a continuation of youthful sexual capacity are as unrealistic as the "old" repressive ones (Cleveland, 1976; Verwoerdt, 1975).

Studies which show remarriage as a viable option for older people may also have a role in encouraging remarriage. Seventy-eight percent of the women and 87 percent of the men I interviewed described themselves as "satisfied" or "very satisfied" in their marriages.

As senior adults gain a more realistic perspective on remarriage and sex in the later years, as they are better able to ascertain others' attitudes toward these areas, and as they have greater access to remarried role models, it seems likely that remarriages will increase.

Social Policy

Social policy, both on a national and grassroots level, is influential in affecting remarriage rates.

It has been estimated that more than 18,000 senior couples live together without marriage (Lobsenz, 1974), in consequence of the financial penalties which have followed remarriage. Although as Comfort (1976) points out, "Living in sin is a highly satisfactory solution...to loneliness and is in favor of sexuality and mutual support," a partnership without clergy would have been difficult and guilt provoking for my respondents, most of whom lived close to kin and pre-marriage friends. Marriage provided them with an acceptable self-image and a positive identity.

As the result of a change in 1965, a remarried couple have been receiving the same Social Security benefits as a couple who have been married since youth. But the amount has not been as much as two single people would receive separately. When she remarries, the woman's benefits have been halved. Legislation has just recently been passed in Congress and signed by

President Carter changing Social Security regulations. One of the provisions allows widows to retain full Social Security benefits upon remarriage. Remarriage will now be financially advantageous. This provision, which will take effect in 1979, will certainly encourage people to remarry, and the government will no doubt save money on health services. Several people in my sample would have needed institutionalization or home services if not for the care provided by the spouse.

Pension plans which terminate benefits to the woman upon remarriage probably discourage many people from remarrying. For those who are just getting by financially, this loss could be crucial in the decision to remarry.

In general, with some notable exceptions, staffs of many nursing homes and other institutions seem to lack awareness and sensitivity to the sexual needs of older people. McCrory notes one "home" which prohibited men and women residents from visiting each other's rooms, and discharged people if they remarried. There are, however, some positive indications. Among federal standards incorporated into a "Bill of Rights" for nursing home patients are 1) provision for privacy when a spouse visits a patient and 2) permission for married couples in nursing homes to share a room, unless medically contraindicated.

Also on a more positive note, the proliferation of Senior Citizen Centers and subsidized meal programs around the

country gives elders more opportunity to socialize with the opposite sex. Three couples of the 24 I interviewed had met in these settings. People who work with the elderly are recognizing more and more the value of heterosexual relationships in making life more interesting, more exciting, and varied for older people.

Because of the large numbers of women in excess of men in the elderly population, remarriage is not a panacea -- unless we go back to polygyny, which some, like Maggie Kuhn of the Grey Panthers, have suggested. As long as men continue to marry and remarry younger women, and continue to live a shorter time than their spouses, only a minority of elderly women will be able to remarry. A change in the convention of men marrying younger women, or a change in the life span of men due to future research would influence the rate of remarriage. But these changes will be a long time coming, if ever.

There is "room" for a change in the rate of remarriage, in spite of the sex ratio. Elders who could remarry do not. Changes in social and demographic factors, in attitudes concerning sex and remarriage, and in social policy will affect elders' decisions to remarry. Remarriage is often a viable alternative in later life, and is being recognized as such by an increasing number of younger people, people who work with the elderly, and older people themselves.

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